

Student voice: a powerful and realistic way to prepare students for study in Australia.

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## Abstract

Australian universities are welcoming an increasingly diverse range of international students and they are doing this in the context of increasing international competition for these students. It is vital that our institutions are clear about the nature of the learning experience that they are offering students. Not just the content, but the learning processes, and challenges of daily life. University marketing activities cannot be divorced from the educational experience. Students share their experiences with potential students, and word of mouth marketing is extremely powerful.

To address some of these issues QUT International Students Services in partnership with Faculties created a data DVD which prepares prospective students for study at QUT by setting realistic expectations and giving students a taste of what living and studying in Brisbane is like. It contains nineteen short videos and draws extensively on student voices to articulate the challenges and the achievements of studying in Australia.

This paper will outline the process by which the DVD was created using a very small budget, a German film and television intern, drawing on considerable pools of expertise from both staff and students and by building on goodwill and cooperation across different sectors of the university.

## Key Words

International students, transition, preparation, DVD

## **Introduction**

International education around the world has grown exponentially in recent years. Tertiary education around the world is increasingly becoming 'internationalised', that is, there is an increasing mix of domestic and international students in classes. Many Western countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada provide education for significant numbers of foreign students from an increasingly diverse range of countries. 'Foreign' education is big business.

About 1.6 million students study outside their home country and of those over 500,000 study in the US. (Mazzarol & Hosie cited in Avirutha et al. 2005). Education is the third largest export in Australia. (Marginson 2002) with over 100,000 foreign students studying at Australian universities in 2000 and it is predicted that this will rise to over 500, 000 over the next twenty years. (IDP 2002).

One of the primary advantages of studying abroad is to learn a new culture and adapt to a new learning environment with real life experiences (Rhee & Naowitz Sagaria 2004, Avirutha et al 2005). This is particularly important in business education where graduates will eventually work across a range of countries and cultures. Cross cultural understanding has an important impact on business effectiveness in an increasingly global environment, and what is taught in the classroom needs to be relevant to all the students wherever geographically they follow their careers. (Pearson & Chatterjee 2004)

Despite this, and the fact that Australia, the US, the United Kingdom and many of the other host countries of international students are themselves extremely culturally diverse communities, business education remains essentially mono-cultural in form and Anglo American in content. (De Cieri & Olekalns 2001) This presents extra-ordinary challenges to students who come from a different educational background. These international students may want to understand the 'Western' way of doing things, but may not be familiar or comfortable with, the processes used to facilitate learning. (Pincas 2001) Business classrooms traditionally use a range of Western teaching and learning strategies that focus on critical analysis, oral discussion, problem solving and the possibility of multiple solutions using case studies and discussion groups that require active participation by the students, which many international students find unfamiliar. Every student comes to the classroom with a set of behaviours and characteristics that makes him or her unique (Jones 2005). But international students also come with their own expectations arising from the educational practices of their home communities. (Varga-Atkins & Ashcroft 2004, Sizoo, Malhotra & Bearson 2002, Anderson & Moore 1998) Their potential lack of participation in classroom activities as a result of different learning practices puts constraints on classroom interaction and learning.

The potential benefits of diversity are many. (Cox & Blake 1991, Glaum & Rinker 2002) Not only do international students bring significant revenue to the university but they provide an opportunity for intercultural learning, for a sharing of knowledge and perspectives that could be so important for success in today's global business environment. (Harding 2004) Yet research suggests that from both the teachers and the students perspective there are significant challenges, particularly in the early months of studying in a foreign context. Many international students, who come to study in Australia, learn about Australian business practices in the classroom but gain no practical experience of what Australian business, or in fact Australians, are like. Many international students spend most of their time with other

students who speak their language or who come from a similar cultural background. Australians are not different in this respect. This appears also to be the case in other international contexts. (Glaum & Rinker 2002)

### **Issues raised by teachers concerning International students**

A number of issues relating to the nationally and culturally diverse classroom have been identified by staff and include a range of both personal and educational issues.

- Students are far from familiar environments and often feel home sickness, culture shock and associated grief and stress created by family expectations. These can be most obvious in the early period of their stay. (Dalglish 2006)
- Language issues include a range of different challenges such as: poor oral English language ability, lack of understanding of the broad range of discipline specific language/concepts which are often not anticipated by students but cause considerable difficulties for both teachers and students. These language-related issues raise particular challenges for teachers including: the choice of words - particularly the use of colloquial language; pace needs to be slower; and the difficulty of knowing whether the problem is language or ability. The ability to write academic papers is also often poor. (Dalglish 2006)
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- Students are often very quiet, tend not to listen to/or understand instructions, and need to be checked individually. There can be limited interaction/discussion in class and they appear to need a lot more time than domestic students. (Dalglish 2006, Watkins 2000)
- Students want 'templates' which is seen to be inappropriate particularly at post-graduate level. (Dalglish 2006)
- International students want face-to-face contact with lecturers rather than electronic/telephone contact and this can be very time consuming. (Dalglish 2005,
- There appears to be a lack of shared expectations as a result perhaps of cultural difference in past educational experiences. (Dalglish 2006, Watkins 2000)
- Previous experiences of learning for many international students lead them not to challenge the information they are given. They seek the right answer.
- Many students appear to be unfamiliar with the expectations of critical analysis, oral presentations, participation and debate. (Watkins 2000, Anderson & Moore 1998, Dalglish 2006)

- Many cultures have a high level of respect for teachers. As a result they will not challenge their teachers. Even to ask questions can suggest that the lecturer is not being effective. (Ballard and Clanchy 1997)
- The presence of international students can also curb the amount of material that can be covered, the amount of participation and discussion that occurs. It can lead to being less specific in trying to globalise the issues. More repetition and explanation is required and there is a need to be careful with choice of words. (Dalglish 2006)
- It is often difficult to know at what level to pitch the class and this can lead to a tendency to teach to the lowest level of domestic students. International students often appear to be passive learners and there is a need to choose learning resources and activities carefully and consider different types of assessment. (Dalglish 2006)

### **Issues identified by International Students**

Students choose institutions for a number of reasons: reputation, price, subject offerings, applied orientation, recommendation, personal contacts with academics, pathway and articulation arrangements, location and speed of response (Dalglish, 2005). Despite the thinking, planning and preparation that goes into the decision to study in Australia, many international students are quite unprepared for the reality of the new learning situation. (Watkins 2000, Anderson & Moore 1998) A study conducted in 2005 among international students identified a number of issues (Dalglish 2005). Many were:

- Unaware of the international nature of the student body they will be part of.
- Expecting a range of social activities and facilities that are different from those provided on many campuses.
- Unaware of how different the teaching style was between Australia and their home country.
- Unfamiliar with a self-directed learning regime.
- Finding adjustment stressful
- Missing orientation – without recognising the impact that this would have
- Feeling the lack of individual attention in large institutions
- Concerned that they did not always have the pre-requisite subject knowledge.

- Finding completing examinations in the required time problematic.
- Unexpectedly under pressure during examinations and assignment times.
- Lacked confidence which they felt had an impact on understanding lecturers.
- Placing significant importance on having access to university social activities and an opportunity to meet Australian students. They felt that these opportunities to meet Australian students were lacking.

It appears that the views and concerns of the teachers and students are two sides of a coin, and will have an impact not only on classroom pedagogy but also on the transition process that students have to follow between the educational experiences of their past and the future.

### **Implications for the transition to Australian tertiary education.**

The literature is beginning to recognise the issues that will impact on the transition for international students studying in foreign universities. All students have to adjust to transitions: being away from home, new activities, expectations and relationships as well as the rigours of university learning. For students from other countries the stresses of transition are intensified. (Anderson & Moore 1998)

For many international students in Australian universities the style of teaching and learning presents a major problem (Anderson & Moore, Ballard 1989, Dalglish 2006, Watkins 2000)

International students are faced with the challenges of being away from their homes, families and friends. They undertake to live in a new and unfamiliar environment, often quite different from their expectations. They also find themselves faced with an educational process that is significantly different from the one in which they had been so successful. Additionally they find it more difficult to make the relationships with their teachers and fellow students that they had come to expect (Watkins 2000)

All these perspectives leave us with a number of questions that need to be answered concerning the increasing number of international students that are being recruited to Australian universities.

- What are prospective students told?
- Are they adequately prepared for study in Australia?

- Do we provide adequate learning support?

It is vital that institutions are clear about the nature of the learning experience that they are offering students. Not just the content, but the learning processes, the social activities, and the links to potential employment. International students are looking at the world from a different perspective, assessing the relevance and quality to fit into a context quite different from Australia. To do that the Faculty of Business (FAB) and International Student Services (ISS) at QUT set about developing a product that would assist students with this complex and difficult adjustment before they arrived in Australia, so that they could make a smooth transition, get the maximum out of the orientation program and adjust to the learning environment, using existing services where problems arose.

The project idea resulted from collaboration between Carol Dalglish, the Director of Internationalisation in the Faculty of Business and Lynda Lawson from International Student Services (ISS). Development and implementation required further extensive collaboration between other staff in ISS, the Faculty of Business International Office, Faculty of Business academic staff, business students, the Faculty of Creative Industries and film maker and international student intern from the Institute of Applied Sciences in Berlin, Christian Haker. This extensive collaboration was essential to creating a product that reflected the diversity of experiences and complexity of issues faced by international students and those who provide learning opportunities and support. Academic staff welcomed the filming team into their classrooms to capture authentic classroom environments. International students provided candid examples of their experiences and the strategies they had used to be successful. And the film maker, as an international student, ensured that the videos reflect the Australian university context through genuine 'new comer' eyes.

The overall objective of the project was to assist international students to understand and therefore better adjust to learning in Business at QUT. The specific aim was to create a tool which provides essential pre-orientation information and advice to students before they leave home to live and study in Brisbane. Murphy, Hawkes and Law 2002, suggest that where cultural adjustment is required, catching students before departure is a very effective time to introduce key information about lifestyle, culture and approaches to teaching and learning.

### **Overview of product**

*Welcome to Studying Business at QUT* is a Data DVD with 19 short videos capturing a student perspective on life and study in Brisbane. Forty percent of the content is related to living and studying in South-East Queensland and includes sections on accommodation, lifestyle, food and transport etc. (see figure 1) The other sixty percent takes an in-depth look at studying business at QUT and features students and academics talking about issues such as assessment, academic writing, working in groups (See figure 2). It is designed to be played in a PC and thus links students directly to web based resources both in and outside QUT. Students can 'dip' into the resource at their point of interest without having to watch the whole DVD in chronological order. Its format also allows student to 'drill down' to find answers to their particular questions about living and studying in Australia.

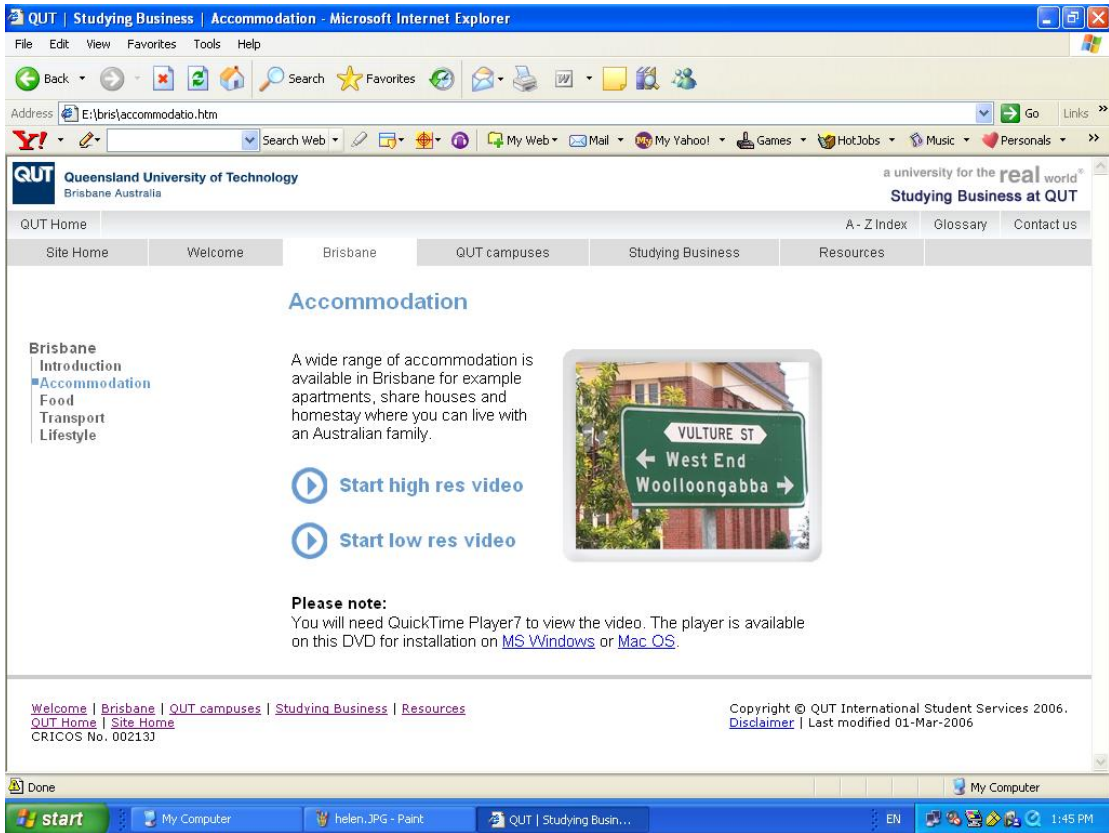


Figure 1

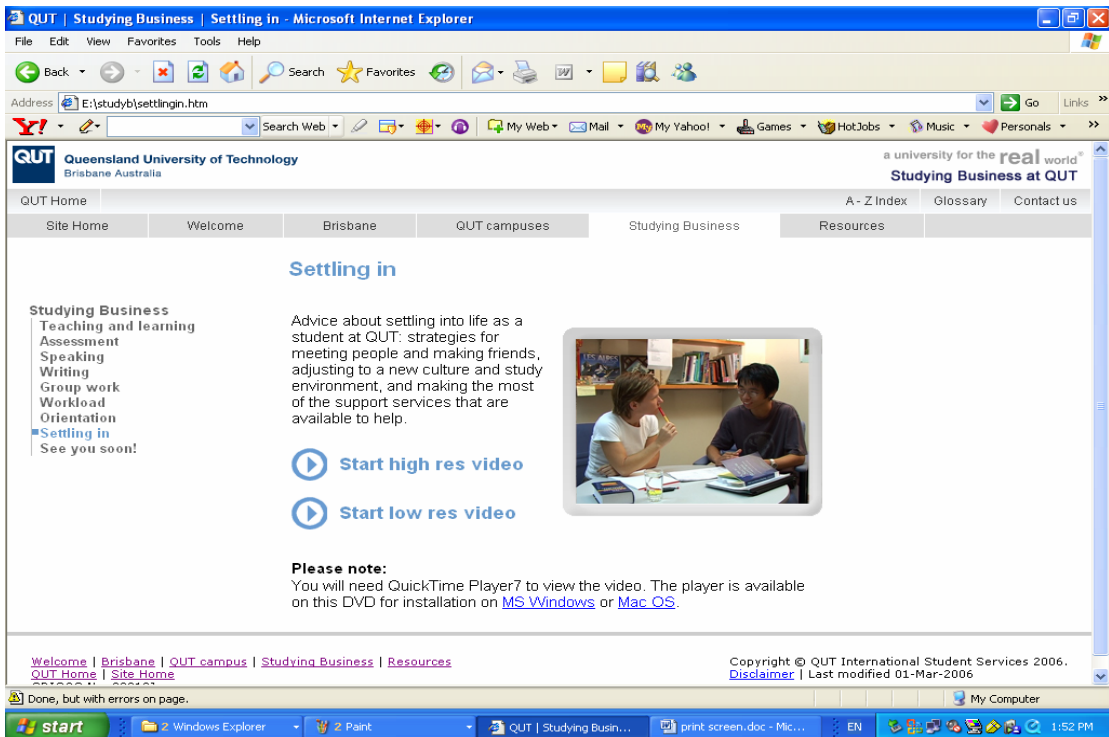


Figure 2

## **Development and production process**

### *Inspiration and Resources*

QUT International Student Services (ISS) has produced a number of resources to assist international students with aspects of studying at QUT e.g. Getting the Job, English for International Nurses, Becoming a Writer at University, Casey and Lorna's Story. The aim with all of these resources is to capture the student voice to present an authentic insight into the pressures and rewards of studying. This philosophy continued in the production of *Welcome to Studying Business at QUT* by:

1. using a young international student as the camera man, editor, designer and creator of the interface .
2. using a 3<sup>rd</sup> year Creative Industries Non English speaking background (NESB) student as narrator
3. allowing the unscripted /lightly scripted contributions of six student participants to shape the content of much of the video .

The original impetus for the DVD came from a conversation between International Student Services and the director of internationalisation in the Faculty of Business. Given the timing of the product ( ie it is to be sent out with offer letters, and therefore before students are officially enrolled), internal funding was not readily available. Finally a small contribution was made by Student Support Services and the Faculty of Business. As all the filming took place outside term time, the Faculty of Creative Industries generously provided all the equipment required; a colleague in Creative Industries also facilitated the finding of our film maker, a fifth semester student at University of Applied Sciences in Berlin. Part of his course requirements were that he spend a semester abroad. International Student Services (ISS) were able to sponsor him as an occupational trainee. The flexible and supportive structure of ISS was a key factor in the project's success. ISS has a long tradition of hosting interns and students on placement and our intern was welcomed and supported by the ISS team at every stage of his 4 month stay. Academic staff of the Faculty welcomed the filmmaker into their classes enabling an authentic view of classroom and student/staff interaction to be filmed.

### *Scripting and Filming*

The DVD is divided into four main sections: Welcome, Brisbane, Campuses and Studying. This section will discuss how these were scripted and filmed.

### **Sections one, two and three: Welcome, Brisbane, Campuses**

ISS scripted the video and filming for the first three sections took place in Brisbane and the Sunshine Coast over 2 weeks in November 2005.

The visual content was an amalgam: it was informed by research (Dalglish 2005) and ISS experience of areas for concern for international students and their families, but it was filmed through the eyes of a newly arrived student, who was discovering Brisbane as he filmed it. He had grown up in a Berlin high-rise and had never travelled outside Europe before, the film records some of his observations: for example the cat on the steps of an old Queenslander, a



kookaburra on a vine in the rainforest. He had read about hot air balloons over Brisbane in his guide book and from this germ of an idea came the spectacular aerial footage he took from a hot air balloon, this begins and ends the DVD.

The film was shot using 2 mini DV cameras (SONY 950E). This unobtrusive medium provided the flexibility to capture impromptu images that a team with heavier equipment may have missed (for example two students rehearsing a presentation in the botanical gardens and a close up of a Hallal kebab being made in a suburban shopping centre ).The quality of images is however superb.

During the process of writing the script we developed a stylistic device which we called 'the list effect'. We noticed that we had several lists in the narration such as: "Getting around Brisbane is easy. You can walk, travel by bicycle, catch a bus, ride a train or take the City Cat." Rather than having the narrator in one spot delivering the line, we thought it might be more interesting to see him in the location he was talking about while he was delivering his line. As we used this effect three times we had to film in many more locations than expected; shooting on the beach, in the rainforest, next to stunning views and in several spots in Brisbane.

As we filmed around public places in Brisbane official permission was required from the local council and the transport authorities. This was time consuming, bureaucratic and bemusing for our European colleague.

#### **Section four: Studying Business**

This section was based on twelve forty minute interviews with six international students from a range of backgrounds and ages at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels and five academics from the Faculty of Business. These interviews were filmed using two cameras at locations on campus and in students' own homes.

Interviewees were asked to comment on the following issues: teaching and learning, assessment, speaking, writing, group work, work load orientation and advice for incoming students. Whilst the questions we asked were the same for each person, these interviews were not scripted and our aim was always to capture an authentic student voice and the experience of individual teaching staff.

#### *Editing*

Editing was completed in a month using Adobe Premier Pro. This was again a team effort with many hours spent piecing together footage and appropriate lines from the interviews and organising these under the themes which would eventually become the menus for the DVD. The nineteen video clips that resulted are on average eight minutes long.

### *Format and HTML interface*

In a very early stage of the production we thought about whether this DVD would be a Data or Video DVD. We decided very quickly in favour of a Data DVD, as the secondary purpose of this package was to provide some more details than just the information given in the video, e.g. we wanted to provide some links to important web sites, both inside QUT and Brisbane wide. A video DVD only provides limited opportunities to add links and is not a medium through which to give a lot of written information.

Being a DATA DVD it is able to accommodate an HTML interface. This interface uses the corporate design of all QUT websites and therefore provides a familiar environment for the users. We chose to use a DDVD rather than a DVD as we wanted to have maximum quality for our videos. By the end of the project the DVD contained 19 videos in QuickTime format, which were embedded in the HTML interface.

### *Evaluation and Piloting*

By the end of February a prototype had been created. This was trialled among students and stakeholders and a number of modifications were then introduced e.g. the option to view either high or low resolution video.

The final version was created and 500 copies were sent out to prospective business students who were made an offer for Semester Two 2006.

### **Conclusions**

Nothing can totally prepare someone for their first visit to a different country. What the DVD does attempt to do is make students aware of the questions they need to ask, the differences they will encounter and the strategies that may contribute to their learning success. If our students feel a little less homesick, a little better oriented and are able to give of their best in the learning environment from their first semester, then the DVD will have been a success. This feedback from a student who has used the DVD is encouraging.

*“I started a business degree at QUT in 2004 as an international student. This was a major decision for me and I had a million worries and questions flying around my head. After having looked through the new 'Welcome to Studying Business at QUT' DVD I am convinced that a lot of the anguish and worry I experienced back then, could have been avoided, had such a resource been available. As an international student a lot of the insecurities experienced stem from not knowing the basic details of what is going to happen. Un certainty regarding issues such as how I will be taught, if there is any group work, if it is ok to ask questions, how grades are decided upon, where to go for classes and what to wear, all seem quite overwhelming. These basic factors can be fundamentally different when you come from another country and had I been provided some of the answers, like future international students will with this DVD, I know that I would have felt more confident when starting at QUT and had more energy to focus on enjoying my first semester.” Maya Christensen (QUT Bachelor of Business 2005 from Denmark)*

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